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ABSTRACT

Most research on the long-term outcomes of early enrichment programs for low-income children suggests that the effects of Head Start participation and similar experiences are to help narrow the gap between academic achievement of low-income and higher-income children. The failure of children from low-income families to excel in public schools has been attributed to their tendency to develop skills more appropriate to a different cultural setting than what fits within an academic setting. Poor children experience different kinds of verbal interactions with adults and generally less academic, intellectual stimulation in their homes. Thus, when entering school, low-income children bring with them different backgrounds from middle-class children, resulting in differing ways of relating to adult authority figures in school settings. This research was conducted under the premise that the degree to which children are either adult- or peer-oriented is a critical factor for school success. Preschool children who spend more time with adult caregivers develop expectations of adults as valuable resources and also cultivate greater skill in using adults as resources. The research suggests that Head Start programs can show children that adult, extra-family caregivers can also be valuable resources. The approach suggested includes an emphasis on the role of adults, especially teachers, as useful resources, facilitators of interesting activities, and as a means of comfort and assistance for children. Contains 28 references. (BGC)

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Early Orientation and Later School Achievement

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Most research on the long-term outcomes of early enrichment programs aimed at low-income children suggests that the effects of experiences such as participation in Head Start do help to narrow the gap between the academic achievement of low-income children and their more affluent peers. However, these gains tend to "wash out" by the time children reach the third grade (McKey, et al., 1985), or after termination of "follow-through" programs (Becker & Gersten, 1982). Even when long-term effects of early intervention can be demonstrated, they are modest, primarily involving reduced rates of retention in grade, special education class placements, and slightly increased rates of high school graduation (Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Currie & Thomas, 1993; Miller & Bizzell, 1983, 1984). Moreover, often, only a small subgroup of targeted children actually achieves the intended gains (Hebbler, 1985).

Beyond differences in the quality of schools serving high- and low-income children, and the lack of continuing support for the latter and their families, (Lee et al., 1990), the failure of low-income children to prosper in the public school system has been attributed to their having developed skills more appropriate to different (sub) cultural milieus (Nelson-Le Gall & Jones, 1991; Paul, 1992). For example, compared to their middle-class counterparts, poor children are reported to experience different kinds of verbal interactions with adults, e.g., less general

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conversation, fewer rhetorical inquiries, etc. (Walker, et al., 1994), and less "academic" intellectual stimulation in their homes (Bradley et al., 1989; Marvin & Mirenda, 1993). These data suggest that children from low-income families enter the school system with rather different experiential backgrounds than their middle-class peers, and thus may display different ways of relating to adult authority figures in such settings. In addition, it has been suggested that, because the antecedents of later academic success differ according to ethnic background (e.g., Bradley, et al., 1989), in order to prepare them for success in the educational system, low-income children from different ethnic groups may require (early) curricula tailored to their particular experiential histories (e.g., Tharp, 1989).

We suggest that there is another factor that is critical for success in the schoool system. It is one that cuts across social class and ethnic lines, and must be appreciated in order to understand young children's responses to educational opportunities. This is the degree to which they are adult- or peer-oriented.

Many have noted stable, individual differences <u>across</u> children in the degrees to which they sought out age mates or adults as preferred interactants in a range of settings (e.g., Feitelson, et al., 1972; Marshall, 1961; Smith, 1973; see also Wachs, 1993). In addition, during free play, preschoolers' peer interactions have been reported to occur more frequently in the absence of caregivers than in their presence (De Klyen & Odom, 1989). Our research has not only replicated these findings, but also indicates that individual differences in social orientation may develop in the early childhood period.

We found that the tendency to seek the company of peers at the expense of time spent in the company of adults represents a "choice" that confronts <u>individual</u> children from very diverse backgrounds and is one which becomes stronger between the ages of 2 1/2 and 3 1/2 years. Over a period of several years, we observed the free-play social interactions of youngsters enrolled in seven, different,

"traditional", discovery-oriented, preschool programs serving white, middle-class families, families receiving AFDC, and the offspring of Mexican migrant farm workers. Interactions (behaviors in response to, or evoking/obviously intended to evoke a reaction from another) with peers and with adult caregivers were scored independently, i.e., a child could be credited with interacting with both an adult and a child at the same moment. Across all groups, during free play, individual children--even those as young as 2 1/2 years of age--treated interacting with adults as an alternative to interacting with their age mates. That is, on days when a child spent large amounts of time interacting with other children, s/he spent relatively less time interacting with adults-- time alone, or time spent in parallel play were not consistently negatively affected by time spent in peer interaction (Harper & Huie, 1985). The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients between peer interaction and time with adults for 177, 3- to 5-year-olds had a mean value around -.45, and a modal value closer to -.60. The "trade-off" between peer- and adult-interaction proved largely to be due to the children; they initiated the bulk of adult-child interactions (Harper & Huie, 1987).

The tendency to treat interacting with adults as an alternative to interacting with peers seemed to increase with age and group experience. Among a group of 34, 2 1/2-year-olds, across a 30-week period, the trade-off was less marked than for the older preschoolers, and seemed to remain relatively constant over time (mean r = around -.30). In contrast, among the 83 children who were 3 years old and older, and for whom we had comparable data, the trade-off became more pronounced (mean rs increasing from around -.37 to -.52) as they became more familiar with their age mates (Harper & Huie, 1987).

This phenomenon can be significant in understanding how experiences gained prior to elementary school entry could shape low-income youngsters' reactions to the classroom environment. To the extent that children have found their

age mates or siblings to be more forthcoming as social companions--or caregivers--they may have developed a "social orientation" inappropriate for the adult-structured activities typical of a school classroom. That is, given a trade-off between turning toward adults or age mates, children who have had relatively little adult support or intellectual stimulation--for whatever reason--may enter elementary school with the expectation that they have little to gain from adults (teachers) and act accordingly. Evidence for this possibility comes from our additional finding that, even among middle-class youngsters whose performances averaged above the norm on tests of school achievement, those children who, as preschoolers, spent more time interacting with adults achieved significantly higher scores on standardized achievement tests at the end of third grade than did their preschool peers who spent relatively more time interacting with their age mates (Harper & Huie, 1987). The generalizability of these findings to Head Start is suggested by Goldberg's (1991) report that Head Start "high achievers" engaged in more verbal exchanges with adults during outdoor, free play than did their low-achieving counterparts.

We suggest that, children who, as preschoolers, spend more time with adult caregivers not only develop an expectation that adults <u>can</u> be valuable resources, but also develop greater skill at "<u>using</u>" adults as resources (cf. White et al., 1978; see also Raver & Zigler, 1991). The significance of such expectations/skills becomes clear when one considers the large body of research documenting a consensus among elementary school teachers in both the U.S.A. and Australia that certain attitudes and behaviors are important for enabling pupils to make normal educational gains (e.g., Kaufman et al., 1991; Walker & Lamon, 1987). Moreover, teachers' perceptions of the degree to which children express such attributes predict student achievement (Stinnett & Oehler-Stinnett, 1992). Given the foregoing, then, we suggest that Head Start can prepare children for elementary school by emphasizing the development of both the expectation that adult, extra-family caregivers will be valuable resources,

and the acquisition of (adult-relevant) social skills for eliciting and maintaining adult involvement.

We argue that, to the extent that youngsters enrolled in a Head Start Center have had limited opportunities outside the classroom for interactions with people other than children, curricula focused on facilitating spontaneous, age mate social exchanges--beyond efforts to help them develop non-violent means for resolving disputes, and respect for the property and ongoing activities of others--may be counterproductive. Rather, a more productive approach would be to emphasize the role of adults, especially teachers, as sources of useful knowledge, as facilitators of interesting activities, and as havens of comfort or assistance when children encounter difficulties. We argue that curricula emphasizing reading stories, and activities such as art projects, which are attractive to essentially all children and which require some adult assistance for their completion, tend to encourage more adult- (than peer-) oriented social exchanges (Harper & Huie, Submitted) and thereby should cause youngsters to increasingly turn to adults as resources.

Insofar as certain activity-settings seem to lend themselves to social exchanges with peers, but not with adults during free play, we would suggest that (play) materials and apparatus be selected, and/or that curriculum elements be devised, so as to maximize the focus on adults. For example, among children from diverse backgrounds, free-play peer exchanges tend to be facilitated and contacts with adults inhibited in enclosed play "forts" or similar structures, in open sand, and in "housekeeping" or "doll-play" corners (Harper & Huie, Submitted). If such settings are present or considered desirable at a Center, then staff should consider ways to structure the activities occurring in these settings rather than leave them entirely to the children themselves, e.g., by providing "props" such as costumes, or toy appliances, etc. on demand and actively promoting a theme such as "playing store" (a context that would also lend itself to teaching counting or similar skills). Such adult-

structuring of activities need not be at the expense of peer interaction and even may facilitate desirable, low-probability exchanges (De Klyen & Odom, 1989).

We suggest that curricula focused on developing expectations for positive and productive interactions with adult teachers will lead to a carry-over from Head Start to the elementary years. If both the physical surroundings and curricular philosophy in Head Start encourage children to appropriately turn to their teachers for information, guidance, and support, then, when they enter elementary school, they should have developed attitudes and behaviors that would make their teachers more likely to feel that the children will benefit from their efforts to educate them. Specifically, we suggest that Head Start teachers consciously encourage children to appropriately verbalize their needs and concerns to teachers, engage children in general conversations, and direct "rhetorical" questions to them (with enough time and encouragement to respond); that they make a point of teaching new and satisfying skills, and provide comfort and assistance in dealing with problems involving materials/objects or other children.

To complement these activities, youngsters enrolled in Head Start should continue be familiarized with classroom rules similar to those encountered in elementary schools. Curricula should train them to: respect rules regarding others' property and acceptable classroom/ game behavior (especially the importance of paying attention to a teacher's instructions and adherence to the rules against what middle-class teachers view as manipulating others for personal advantage, and "cheating"); to accept directions/correction gracefully, to work on projects/tasks and meet deadlines independently, and to employ forms of address and other conventions deemed "polite" by elementary school teachers. Clearly, it makes no sense to instill expectations of adult support and guidance without also continuing to provide children with the skills appropriate for evoking and sustaining teacher solicitude. To the extent that children expect "good things" from their teachers, are familiar with

adult-structured routines, and have the social skills suited to elementary school contexts, we would expect them to be able to initiate a cycle of positive interactions leading to sustained educational progress.

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